

Nigeria's Image Problem and Image-Polishing: Foreign Policy Responses since 1999

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Abstract: The inaugural speeches of successive regimes since 1999 show an increasing recognition of Nigeria's external image problem, especially with key governance indicators like corruption perception and human rights promotion. There is an equally growing awareness of the challenge this national image problem, acquired under decades of military rule, presents to foreign policy, demonstrating that perception matters in international relations. Consequently, what can be termed image-polishing appears to have dominated the country's foreign policy space since 1999. Drawing on data from relevant international organizations, this article empirically demonstrates that external perception of Nigeria has not improved significantly after two decades of image-polishing foreign policy. This is expected, as efforts designed to shore-up the national image have been framed by toxic domestic politics. Ultimately, Nigeria's image-polishing foreign policy thrust is enmeshed in denial and rhetorical commitment and as a result suffers a lack of constructive engagement with the country's image problem. Constructive engagement with national image problem is therefore recommended.

Key words: foreign policy, image-polishing, image repair, national image, perception

Introduction

Overall, Nigeria is unfavorably perceived by the world outside its borders. This image problem, as the article will reveal, has been a major challenge to foreign policy. Since isolation is not a possible option in a globalizing world, negative external perceptions do not serve the purpose of foreign policy of any state and the national interest it seeks to pursue. For instance, a state with a reputation for political instability and corruption would normally attract little Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).¹ It is partly for reasons like the aforementioned that states employ their foreign policy as a tool for projecting a positive national image and preventing a negative one.

This is the path Nigeria has followed since 1999 when it laid the foundation for a foreign policy of image-polishing with the hope of salvaging the battered image of the country after

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successive military regimes. This new era of image-polishing that started with during the Obasanjo presidency gained much momentum and public attention with the 'rebranding Nigeria' narrative of the Yar'Adua presidency. Successive administrations initiated their own version of the image-polishing project. To what extent the national image has been salvaged is a question worthy of reflection. As Nigeria was not always negatively perceived by the outside world, the aim of this article is also to understand how and at what point Nigeria metamorphosed from a country with untold possibilities at independence to one regarded among the most corrupt in the world.

Accordingly, Nigeria has been likened to a giant that is in danger of becoming a dwarf. This observation was informed largely by the leadership problem that has battered the country's image externally. As noted by Adebajo, there is hardly any doubt about the potentials of Nigeria to lead Africa. Leadership, however, has been the bane of the country: "Nigeria, the most populous country and one of the most powerful states in Africa, is a Gulliver; and the Lilliputians have been Nigeria's leaders, whose petty ambitions and often inhumane greed – like the creatures in Swift's tale – have prevented a country of enormous potential from fulfilling its leadership aspirations and development potential."² Most external observers agreed with this imaging of Nigeria. For instance, a former British Prime Minister reportedly described Nigeria as a fantastically corrupt country.³ Such views corroborate that of Adebajo, who notes that Nigeria remains a largely poor country with more than 70% of the population living on less than a dollar a day even when the country's leaders have reportedly squandered an estimated 380 billion dollars of oil wealth since independence.⁴ To the outside world therefore, Nigeria is a country that is constantly in danger of failing to fulfil its destiny in Africa and globally.

Historicizing Nigeria's Image Problem and External Perceptions

Image-polishing became a pronounced part of Nigeria's foreign policy during the regime of General Yakubu Gowon. This new face of Nigeria's foreign policy was born in response to the Nigerian civil war. Nigeria at this time found itself in a situation where it had to explain its position on the conflict to the outside world as a way of swaying international public opinion and garnering international support.⁵ Importantly, the 'No Victor, No Vanquish' declaration of the Gowon government to mark the end of the civil war won the admiration of the international community.⁶ The immediate post-civil war years therefore marked an era of ascendancy in Nigeria's foreign policy and external image. This positive image was soon strengthened by the oil boom that followed.

Remarkably, the oil boom meant Nigeria suddenly had the economic capability to support a proactive foreign policy. For instance, Gowon reportedly led Nigeria to play a leading role in the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).⁷ The short-lived military regime of Murtala took Nigeria's foreign policy into what became known as the "Golden Age" as the country took a leadership place in African affairs.⁸ Under Murtala, Nigeria had an anti-imperialism and pro-liberation image. This image is well captured by General Murtala at the 24th Organization of African Unity (OAU) extra-ordinary meeting in Angola in 1976:

...the United States Government as well as the Governments of many Western countries saw Africa struggle against imperialism as directed against western interests. As long as Africa remains dependent, it is within the orbit of NATO countries and is available for exploitation to sustain Western prosperity while Africa sinks deeper into poverty.⁹

Consistent with this pro-liberation and anti-imperialism image, the Murtala government positioned itself at the forefront of liberation struggles in Africa. This continued under the military regime of Obasanjo and was clearly noticeable in the opposition to white minority rule in southern Africa. The active role Nigeria played in regional politics during the Murtala-Obasanjo era gained Nigeria international prominence. Ajayi supports this view: "With all these involvements in international politics, Nigeria became a regional power and centre of influence, particularly in Africa."¹⁰ This proactive posture of Nigeria has been partly attributed to the oil boom that supported a buoyant economy and provided the space for a proactive foreign policy: "...combined with a viable economy until the mid-1980s, Nigeria was a toast of many states seeking either its influence or support on global issues or financial assistance."¹¹

However, Adebajo observes that Nigeria became isolationist with the oil bust and commodity price crisis of the 1980s.¹² This isolationist tendency manifested clearly under both the Shagari regime and the military junta of Buhari. Under the two regimes, Nigeria declared as aliens and subsequently expelled citizens of ECOWAS states in 1983-85. The expulsion actions, which affected an estimated three million ECOWAS citizens, were in clear contradiction of two important principles upon which Nigeria's foreign policy is built: good neighborliness and regional integration. The expulsion actions violated Nigeria's commitment to the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons.¹³ Hindsight should however have suggested that such foreign policy would create image and reputation problems for Nigeria, as it actually did.¹⁴ This becomes even more obvious when placed in the perspective of the 'big brother of Africa' image of itself Nigeria had always sought to promote to the external world.

Nevertheless, Folarin notes some image-polishing efforts of the Buhari regime, which was built on a strong anti-corruption and anti-drug drives.¹⁵ However, its poor human rights records did not endear the Buhari's government to many international and local observers. It is against this backdrop that Ajayi partly traces the origin of Nigeria's image problem to the military dictatorship of Buhari regime over 1983-85.¹⁶ This regime was notorious for its draconian anti-human rights decrees and policies. Decree No. 4 of 1984, which restricted press freedom, was notable in this instance. In this sense, the Buhari era is for some authors a starting point of decline in Nigeria's image in international relations.¹⁷

The subsequent Babangida regime could be viewed as a missed opportunity to cleanse Nigeria's soiled external image, as it tried to present itself as a break from the previous draconian regime. However, rather than salvage what was left of Nigeria's battered image abroad, the country's image problem was compounded under Babangida, whom many believed institutionalized corruption in the country. Ajayi notes in this context that the regime advanced corruption and bribery to a level of state policy, and thereby compounded the moral image of the nation.¹⁸

External perception of Nigeria worsened further under the Abacha regime, which built for itself and the nation a brutish reputation. Nigeria was widely noted for gross human rights

violations and extrajudicial killings under the Abacha regime. This negative reputation climaxed with the execution, against all international appeals, of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues in 1995. This single action of the regime would quickly earn Nigeria pariah status.¹⁹ From this, it was quite easy for Ajayi, like many other commentators, to assert that: "it was under the Abacha regime that the nation's image reached zero level, and the character of the state as a pariah became much more pronounced. The nation and Nigerians lost respect and prestige internationally."²⁰

Overall, there is a marked consensus in the literature that Nigeria's external image problem climaxed during the Abacha regime.²¹ Therefore, the primary foreign policy task before General Abubakar—who took over power when Abacha suddenly died in 1998—was how to pull Nigeria out of isolation by improving its image abroad. Setting a timetable for transition and the eventual restoration of civilian rule in 1999 helped put Nigeria on the path to recovery of its external image.

The Image-Foreign Policy Nexus and the Role of Perception in International Relations

Image-polishing in Nigeria's foreign policy can be located within the broader context of image theory and the role of perception in international relations, following Boulding and Jervis.²² Within this framework, international relations are viewed as interplay of images.²³ While Elsbach identifies image as one of three key components of perception, Herrmann et al. postulate that image within the context of IR can be understood as an actor's internal view of itself and its universe.²⁴ Ametbek conceptualizes image theory as strategic decision making that identifies the primary judgments guiding international images, or stereotypes, and the selection of international policies.²⁵

To underline the centrality of perception in IR and foreign policy, Jervis argues that interest alone cannot explain state policies.²⁶ Although Max Weber notably contested that interests rather than ideas govern the actions of people, Jervis underlines the central role ideas and images play in explaining actions taken to advance interests. In this regard, we cannot explain state policies without reference to the ideas underlying such policies—but we also cannot make sense of state interests without recourse to the beliefs that frame such interests. Jervis explains that though United States post-war opposition to the Soviet Union was informed by interests (either national or elite), the policy formed only after Soviet actions were perceived as highly aggressive by the US.²⁷ The place of perception in international relations and foreign policy thus cannot be discounted. States therefore formulate policy to protect or advance interests only after they have formulated beliefs about external actors. Given that different actors behave in dissimilar ways when confronted with the same situation, one cannot but grant that perception matters in IR and foreign policy. Accordingly, Jervis further argues that actors' behaviors are not always determined by the situations in which they find themselves but often by their beliefs and value systems.²⁸

Li and Chitty expatiate on the link between foreign policy and image by identifying three layers/attributes of national image, namely: cognitive, affective, and action respectively.²⁹ Cognitive attributes are how a state is perceived by the outside world while affective attributes describe reactions to these perceived attributes. Action attributes refer to responses to the perceived attributes.³⁰ Within the context of international relations and foreign policy, national

image is essentially a country's reputation abroad.³¹ Image-polishing policy is how a government responds through foreign policy to create a favorable external perception or to repair its external image. External perceptions matter to states as these determine relations with the external world. As information flows with ease and more speed today, national image has become one of the chief preoccupations of foreign policy.³² States have therefore become more attentive to their national image in the world beyond their borders.³³ Political leaders promote a positive image of their domains abroad while trying to counter unfavorable stereotypes.³⁴

Boulding asserts that it is always the image, not the truth that immediately determines behavior.³⁵ States and other actors in international relations act according to the way the world appears to them. The image of a country therefore matters in international relations, and states must make deliberate efforts to construct a positive international image. Elsbach terms the efforts by states to construct a positive image as perception management.³⁶ Perception management entails deliberate efforts to protect and manage positive images, identities, or reputations.³⁷ In this regard, Benoit's image restoration theory offers useful insights into strategies adopted by states to manage external perception.³⁸ Image restoration strategies can range from denial of acts and evasion of responsibility to reducing the offensiveness of acts and taking corrective action. Image restoration strategies can as well take the form of mortification—an image repair approach built on asking for forgiveness.

Image Problems and Nigeria's Response since 1999

In view of the diversity of strategic options for image restoration, it becomes important to understand the path that successive regimes in Nigeria have taken. For instance, Nigeria variously made use of what Benoit calls "bolstering."³⁹ Often, regimes have been quick to assure international audience of positive steps being taken to fight corruption in Nigeria. Attempts at bolstering can be gleaned from statements such as "we will fight corruption head on" and "there will be no sacred cows."⁴⁰ One major problem with bolstering as an approach to image repair is that words alone are not always enough to sustain a favorable image.⁴¹

Nigeria also sought to repair national image by adopting what Benoit terms "downplaying."⁴² Downplaying the extent of the damage corruption has done to Nigeria's image was a strategy adopted under President Jonathan. For instance, Jonathan reportedly said that accusations of corruption against Nigeria are generally exaggerated.⁴³ The president also argued what is branded corruption in Nigeria is in fact theft and that theft is not corruption. Even if the scale and impact of corruption in Nigeria is exaggerated, it is still perception rather than reality of corruption that continues to frame external responses.⁴⁴ The unfavorable perception is therefore enough to both threaten and undermine national image. Therefore, Nigeria's corruption-related image problem has little to do with what the president thinks is the true state of affairs. In this context, image repair becomes imperative and it is here that we must locate the various image-polishing efforts of successive regimes since 1999.

Exactly what image has Nigeria sought to project to the outside world since 1999? How much has it achieved in this regard from a foreign policy view point? One important source of image-shaping messages are the statements of decision makers.⁴⁵ So to answer the first of these questions, an examination of inaugural speeches by Nigeria's heads of state provides one way of understanding and analyzing how successive regimes have responded to national image

problem. This analytical approach is consistent with Boulding (as noted in Ametbek) who identifies messaging as a core determinant of image in international relations.⁴⁶ Messaging in this context is understood as all the activities of a state that can affect its external image. Intended policy direction is often well captured in inaugural speeches. More often than not, successive regimes have used the inaugural speech to address some core national problems, especially those that have image ramifications.

The successful transition to civil rule that brought Obasanjo back to power as president provided opportunities to actualize the image repair process that had begun under the Abubakar regime. Obasanjo's foreign policy posture as a civilian head of state was aided by the reputation he has built over the years as a statesman, notably as the first military ruler to have handed over power to a democratically elected government in Nigeria.⁴⁷ Still, as the first civilian regime after almost two decades of uninterrupted military rule, Obasanjo inherited the image problem foisted on the country under the military.

Obasanjo was therefore saddled with the responsibility to redeem the image of Nigeria. Restoring both regional and international confidence of governance in Nigeria became a primary foreign policy goal of the Obasanjo regime. It is therefore not surprising that anti-corruption and human rights featured prominently in the inaugural speech of 29 May 1999:

Together, we shall take steps to halt the decline in the human development indices as they apply to Nigeria. All the impacts of bad governance on our people that are immediately removable will be removed while working for medium and long-term solutions. Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today, will be tackled head-on at all levels. Corruption is incipient in all human societies and in most human activities, but it must not be condoned. This is why laws are made and enforced to check corruption so that society will survive and develop in an orderly, reasonable, and predictable way. No society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the full-blown cancer it has become in Nigeria. One of the greatest tragedies of military rule in recent times is that corruption was allowed to grow unchallenged and unchecked even when it was glaring for everybody to see. Rules and regulations for doing official business were deliberately ignored, set aside, or by-passed to facilitate corrupt practices. The beneficiaries of corruption in all forms will fight back with all the foul means at their disposal. We shall be firm with them. There will be no sacred cows. Nobody, no matter who and where will be allowed to get away with the breach of the law or the perpetration of corruption and evil. Under the administration, therefore, all the rules and regulations designed to help honesty and transparency in dealings with government will be restored and enforced...It is our firm resolve to restore Nigeria fully to her previous prestigious position in the comity of nations.⁴⁸

A declaration of war against corruption is one way which successive governments have sought to reclaim Nigeria's former image. In addition, attention was given to the Niger Delta in his inaugural speech as an effort to draw human rights issues to the core of policy.

Subsequently, this matter also featured prominently in the "Vision 2020" inaugural speech of Yar'Adua:

The crisis in the Niger Delta commands our urgent attention. Ending it is a matter of strategic importance to our country. I will use every resource available to me, with your help, to address this crisis in a spirit of fairness, justice, and cooperation. We have a good starting point because our predecessor already launched a master plan that can serve as a basis for a comprehensive examination of all the issues. We will involve all stakeholders in working out a solution.⁴⁹

This not only attempted to reassure the local audience, but also the international community and external observers concerned with the level of human rights abuses and environmental degradation. Without doubt, the handling of the Niger Delta by past regimes has given Nigeria a negative image. Yar'Adua's speech was also anti-corruption oriented, but focused explicitly on electoral reform:

We acknowledge that our elections had some shortcomings. Thankfully, we have well-established legal avenues of redress, and I urge anyone aggrieved to pursue them. I also believe that our experiences represent an opportunity to learn from our mistakes. Accordingly, I will set up a panel to examine the entire electoral process with a view to ensuring that we raise the quality and standard of our general elections, and thereby deepen our democracy.⁵⁰

The May 2011 inaugural speech of President Jonathan—branded “The Transformation Agenda”—depicts the president as assuring the international business community that Nigeria would be a safe haven for investments. It was clear from the inaugural speech that revamping the ailing economy through collaborations with international partners would be a priority of Nigeria's foreign policy: “We must form technical and financial partnerships with global businesses and organizations. We live in an age where no country can survive on its own. Countries depend on each other for economic well-being. Nigeria is no different. Returns on investment in Nigeria remain among the highest in the world. We will continue to welcome sustainable investment in our economy...”⁵¹ Also, the speech addressed the ongoing national issues of corruption, insecurity, and the Niger Delta. President Jonathan asserted that: “The bane of corruption shall be met by the overwhelming force of our collective determination, to rid our nation of this scourge. The fight against corruption is a war in which we must all enlist, so that the limited resources of this nation will be used for the growth of our common wealth.”⁵² The inaugural speech also sought to assure the international community of Nigeria's commitment to democratic consolidation and human rights at home and across Africa: “We will support the consolidation of democracy, good governance and human rights in the continent. Africa must develop its vast resources to tackle poverty and under development.”⁵³

Buhari had a history of military authoritarianism that followed him into office as a civilian head of state on 29 May 2015 when he took over the presidency from Goodluck Jonathan. However, with the “I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody” inaugural speech, the president allayed fears, both at home and abroad, about whether the regime would embark and dissipate energy on vindictive settling of old scores with political adversaries: “I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody. A few people have privately voiced fears that on coming back to office I shall go after them. These fears are groundless. There will be no paying off old scores. The past is prologue.”⁵⁴ Buhari used his speech to address some of the other issues that have hurt Nigeria's external image, including: Boko Haram and related human rights violations

by the insurgent group and government forces; the Niger Delta; corruption; and general insecurity. He affirmed the resolve of his government to fight pervasive corruption and insecurity head on.

Policy Success? External Perceptions of Nigeria since 1999

It is clear that corruption and human rights are two themes central to Nigeria's external image problem. Analyzing how Nigeria has continued to be ranked with regards to these two issues therefore provides a good framework for assessing the success of Nigeria's image-polishing foreign policy. Protection of fundamental human rights has been an established conditionality for accessing development aid and assistance from major donors.⁵⁵ The same can also be said for corruption, which impacts transparency and governance, and which may in addition determine the direction or flow of FDI.⁵⁶

Human Rights in Nigeria since the 1999 Transition to Civilian Rule

External perception of the state of human rights in Nigeria correlates with its subpar human development index performance. The 1999 Amnesty International (AI) report on the state of human rights in Nigeria included: detention and imprisonment without trial/unfair trials; torture and ill-treatment of prisoners; deaths in detention in unexplained circumstances; intolerance to political opposition; infringement on press freedom; and execution without trial. Although efforts toward change were made by the Abubakar government following the sudden death of Abacha in June 1998, such efforts fell short of expectations. Accordingly, the 1999 AI report notes that the new administration left in place decrees providing for arbitrary detention and imprisonment of prisoners of conscience.⁵⁷

The 2003 AI report notes prevalence of politically motivated killings under Obasanjo's civilian rule.⁵⁸ In 2007, AI reported that the realization of economic, social and cultural rights remained illusory in Nigeria.⁵⁹ By the time Yar'Adua took office in 2007, AI identified Nigeria as one of the countries in Africa where the presence of oil and other minerals continued to blight rather than enhance people's lives because of conflicts, corruption and power struggles.⁶⁰ Despite the promise of electoral reforms and consolidating democracy, the 2011 general election witnessed violent clashes of rival political parties. Reported cases of communal and sectarian violence that resulted in the death of scores of people marred the election. Overall, the 2011 general election was tainted by intimidation, threats, and politically-motivated killings.⁶¹

Since the emergence of armed Islamic insurgents in the northeast of Nigeria, there has been a twist in the focus on human rights abuses in the country. While attention has traditionally been on state-backed abuses, Boko Haram emerged in 2009 as a major actor and by 2013 was intensifying its campaign of violence. The abduction of over 200 Chibok schoolgirls was emblematic of Boko Haram's activities in the northeast of Nigeria especially.⁶² Such expansion of the scope of violence made Boko Haram a threat to both national security and regional stability as activities of the group have spilled over into neighboring Cameroon.

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in more than 20,000 deaths and forced displacement of over 2 million people in Nigeria.⁶³ This is in addition to exposing already traumatized communities to rights violations by state security agents. AI reports cases of arbitrary arrests, beatings, and torture

indicative of human rights violations being committed by both sides to the conflict.⁶⁴ AI notes that the pattern of mass arbitrary arrests and detentions by the military that escalated after the declaration of a state of emergency in the northeast in May 2013 resulted in reported cases of extrajudicial executions by state security forces.⁶⁵ In this regard, David reports a paradoxical relationship between expectations and outcomes of counterinsurgency operations in northeastern Nigeria.⁶⁶ Specifically, counterinsurgency forces of the state that are charged with the protection of human rights in Nigeria are often major source of rights violations like rape and other gender-based sexual violence.⁶⁷

The State of Corruption since 1999

Corruption can do substantial damage to the image of a country. This is especially true of Nigeria, which has carried for decades the burden of being perceived as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The fight against corruption could therefore be viewed as one way through which Nigeria has attempted to favorably reimage how it is perceived by the international community.

Data from Transparency International (TI) allows an assessment of how the external world perceives Nigeria with respect to corruption. The TI corruption perception index (CPI) is based on how a country is perceived. CPI is defined as a “poll of polls” representing the average scores which individual countries have been given by international businessmen and financial journalists when polled in a variety of contexts.⁶⁸ The CPI is an attempt to assess the level at which corruption is perceived as impacting on commercial life. While it is admitted that CPI reports may not reflect the actual state of affairs in a country, the index is based on the reality of perception as captured in the opinions of those critical stakeholders surveyed. Perceptions of this nature have implications for a country’s external relations, as already pointed out.

Table 1 shows that Nigeria ranked 121 (CPI score 2.7) out of 180 countries in 1998. However, by 2016 this ranking fell to 136 out of 176 countries. Surprisingly then, Nigeria ranked better when it was still under a military regime than after civilian rule was almost two decades old. In terms of scoring, it appears that Nigeria achieved its lowest score in 2003 when it recorded a score of 1.4 on a scale of 0 (very poor) to 10 (very clean).

Table 1: Corruption perception of Nigeria since 1998

Year	Rank among countries ranked (CPI score)	Number of countries ranked
1998	121 (2.7)	180
1999	98 (1.6)	99
2003	132 (1.4)	133
2007	147 (2.2)	180
2011	143 (2.4)	183
2015	136 (2.6)	168
2016	136 (2.8)	176
2019	146 (2.6)	180

Source: Transparency International Global Corruption Perception Reports.

When compared with the twilight of the two previous regimes, 2007 could be viewed as the year when Nigeria made some improvements, albeit minimal, on the CPI scale. On the surface, a CPI ranking of 147 out of 180 would suggest a slide relative to the previous periods that marked the end of the two regimes. However, a closer look at how the three regimes performed in 1999, 2003, and 2007 would suggest the contrary. For instance, while the CPI scores for 1999 and 2003 were 1.6 and 1.4 respectively, the 2007 score stood at 2.2, which was a marked improvement that nevertheless falls short of what is required to be categorized as doing well in terms of winning the fight against corruption.

Importantly, the 2007 ranking plus those of 2015 and 2016 further indicate that external perceptions with regards to corruption have not significantly changed as Nigeria continued to be ranked among the most corrupt countries of the world. None of the periods under review show any serious CPI gain for Nigeria. Rather, ranking and scoring have remained at the extreme poor end of the CPI scale. Both the 2015 and 2016 CPI reports regard index scores of below 50 as very poor performance with regards to corruption perception. The 2019 report shows that Nigeria declined even further, ranked 146 and with a CPI index of 26.⁶⁹

Conclusion

As highlighted in this article, Nigeria has sought to influence its image through the policy pronouncements of successive leaders since 1999. These leaders have used the occasion of their inauguration to make statements they hoped could potentially change the way Nigeria is perceived by relevant external observers. However, Anholt warns that countries are judged by what they do and not by what they say.⁷⁰ Accordingly, this analysis has clearly demonstrated that mere statements of reassurance by Nigerian leaders targeting foreign audiences with the aim to repairing the country's soiled image have been hardly adequate for the intended purpose of image restoration or image-polishing. More than anything, the country has continued to be perceived and judged with reference to its behaviors towards governance indicators like human rights and transparency. The proposition that states are judged by actions rather than words may partly explain why Nigeria, despite statements of reassurance from national leaders, has continued to be ranked low on some of the core governance indicators by global watchdogs like Amnesty International and Transparency International.

Crucially, this article demonstrates that external perception of Nigeria has not changed significantly despite the adoption of image-polishing foreign policy by successive regimes since 1999. Accordingly, there should be constructive engagement with Nigeria's image problem by the state and all critical stakeholders. The first step in this direction would be to admit that the country has serious image problem rather than try to dismiss or portray it as exaggerated as attempted under the Jonathan administration. Statements of denial will do more harm than help to the already soiled image of the country.

Lastly, it must be noted that mere words of reassurance like those issued by national leaders during inauguration of their tenure cannot significantly change how Nigeria is perceived by relevant external observers. Rather, what is needed is the political will that backs up policy statements with action. As Anholt points out, there is no evidence anywhere that a marketing communication approach to image repair has ever worked.⁷¹ The country's image cannot be reduced to a product that can be promoted through marketing strategies as suggested

in the image branding approach. Nothing better vindicates this than the Nigerian experience, which shows that the CPI of the country has continued to fall despite persistent policy statements of reassurance by successive regimes since 1999.

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Notes

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